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## **A Problem With Method in Theological Anthropology: Towards an All-Inclusive Theology**

**ABSTRACT:** Although most of the theological anthropologies that have been developed in modern times purport to apply to all human beings, recent theologians representing the causes of feminism, the liberation of the poor and oppressed, or those with disabilities, to name just a few examples, have repeatedly complained that mainstream theologies exclude or at least fail to include these causes amongst their concerns. In this paper, I will draw on the work of Thomas Aquinas to outline a possible framework for incorporating into mainstream systematic theology these theologians' critiques as well as their constructive efforts to account for the image of God in the aforementioned parties. The key to accomplishing this task, I will argue, involves the development of a more differentiated account of sin, which addresses the way that both those included and seemingly excluded from traditional accounts experience and commit sin.

**KEYWORDS:** Feminist Theology, Image of God, David Kelsey, Liberation Theology, Theological Anthropology, Sin, Thomas Aquinas, Virtues, Vices

Since the dawn of Christian intellectual history, some of the greatest theological minds have devoted considerable attention to treating one of the central loci of Christian doctrine, namely, theological anthropology, or the study of human beings as creatures—indeed images—of God.<sup>1</sup> Although most of the theological anthropologies that have been developed in modern times purport to apply to all human beings, recent theologians representing the causes of feminism, the liberation of the poor and oppressed, or those with disabilities, to name just a few examples, have repeatedly complained that mainstream theologies exclude or at least fail to include these causes amongst their concerns.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, my purpose is to outline a possible framework for incorporating into mainstream systematic theology these theologians' critiques as well as their constructive efforts to account for the image of God in the aforementioned parties, among others.

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<sup>1</sup> For an early example, see Augustine's *De Trinitate*, books 8-15. More recent examples can be found in Jürgen Moltmann, *Man* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1985).

<sup>2</sup> See John Swinton, 'Who is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability: Challenges and New Possibilities', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14.2 (Jan. 2011), pp. 273-307.

Although they have not often been recognized as such, such efforts are of direct relevance to theological anthropology, in that they seek to account for the humanity before God of persons who have evidently not been written into mainstream systematic theology. The key to incorporating those efforts, I will argue, involves a methodological shift in terms of the current theological tendency to treat the nature of sin in a rather one-sided manner, that is, from the perspective of those with the power to exclude or include.<sup>3</sup> What is called for, therefore, is the development of a more differentiated account of sin, which addresses the way that both those included and seemingly excluded from traditional accounts experience and commit sin.

Although, in this regard, I will in some ways simply add to an existing body of critique concerning mainstream doctrines of sin, and join forces with those who have tried to construct the ‘other perspective’ on sin, I will seek to move beyond existing material on another level, precisely by sketching an initial framework for articulating a two-fold typology of sin, in which the perspective of both the included and the excluded is inscribed into the very structures of hamartiology. In addition to representing the viewpoint of both parties in question, rather than those of only one or the other, such a framework might enhance the available resources for systematizing and differentiating the ‘other’ views on sin, which tend to arise from experience and are sometimes therefore presented in a fashion that is either somewhat diffuse or parasitic on the accounts of sin critiqued.

With a view to developing this framework, I will draw, albeit constructively, on the work of Thomas Aquinas, a very traditional thinker for the present purposes, who, while affirming the image of God in women, for example, would certainly not have been thinking in terms of what it would mean to create ‘equal opportunities’ for them to reflect that image.<sup>4</sup> The added benefit of invoking Aquinas, of all thinkers, is that doing so shows that resources can be identified within the mainstream discussion itself for incorporating insights on sin that might resonate with those associated with the aforementioned causes—let us call them causes of liberation, where ‘liberation’ is defined in the broadest sense of the term.

In that regard, the use of Aquinas may have the power to address potential anxieties and a corresponding reluctance on the part of mainstream theologians at the thought of overhauling their discipline to accommodate other perspectives. For it not only provides an idea of how to affirm alternative points of view, but also confirms that the project in question

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<sup>3</sup> On this, see Joy Ann McDougall, ‘Sin No More? A Feminist Re-visioning of a Christian Theology of Sin’, *Anglican Theological Review* 88.2 (Spring 2006), pp. 215-235.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ST), Ia.92.

is not a zero-sum game, in which showing consideration for questions of liberation necessitates relinquishing the concerns represented in existing theologies, or indeed ‘scratching’ the whole preceding tradition of ‘male-stream’ theology. By outlining a broadly Thomist typology of sin, consequently, I will aim to open doors for, and encourage, further efforts to create a natural space, rather than an appendix, in mainstream theology for the systematic articulation of the concerns raised by liberation thinkers.

As things stand, such concerns are ordinarily presented in mainline theological texts or ‘handbooks’, if at all, in designated chapters where their content presumably cannot affect the construal of core doctrines or be called to the attention of those who focus on them.<sup>5</sup> By the same token, the theology of liberation thinkers continues to be written from diverse liberation ‘perspectives’. In contrast to the general tendency to treat such theologies as ‘perspectival’, ‘contextual’, or representative of minority and thus to some extent marginal points of view, I will treat them as impetuses to develop an ‘all-inclusive theology’, which draws under its auspices both those formerly included, and those formerly excluded, who collectively represent a majority point of view.

Such a theology, which accommodates both perspectives within the scope of a single line of inquiry, is essential on my understanding to the integrity of theological anthropology and to systematic theology more generally. After all, it is inconsistent with the divine design to empower *all* persons to realize their human potential and thereby image God that some be enabled to do so, at the expense of others. With a view to expanding on what such an inclusive theology might involve, I will start below by explaining more clearly the sort of critique a liberation thinker might mount against mainstream theological anthropologies, with reference to a few examples drawn from feminist theology. I will then assess the extent to which some recent work in theological anthropology, particularly that of David Kelsey, has addressed those critiques.

Subsequently, I will offer a brief description of what it means to reflect God’s image, based on the classic teachings of Thomas Aquinas, who himself benefits in many ways from the thought of Augustine. Contrary to the opinion of some, these and other traditional theological teachings, for instance, on the image of God and theological anthropology more generally, do not need to be discarded just because they need to be nuanced by a more differentiated account of the sins that must be overcome if all persons are to realize that

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<sup>5</sup> For examples of this phenomenon, see the *Oxford Handbook of Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); the *Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

image.<sup>6</sup> Finally, I will outline a two-fold typology of sin derived from the thought of Aquinas in further detail, before showing in a concluding section how it might facilitate the development of a more inclusive theological anthropology.

### **The Critique of Traditional Doctrines of Sin**

The critique of mainstream doctrines of sin, to say nothing of accounts of human personhood or the image of God, is widespread in liberation literature.<sup>7</sup> For the sake of space, however, I will limit my discussion to the related critiques of several feminist theologians, who call attention to the way mainstream theologies tend to overlook their experiences in ways that are emblematic of wider liberation trends. One well-known and relatively early theological critique is presented by Valerie Saiving-Goldstein in her influential article, ‘The Human Situation: A Feminine View’.<sup>8</sup> In this article, Goldstein outlines “a widespread tendency in contemporary theology to describe man’s predicament as rising from his separateness and the anxiety occasioned by it, and to identify sin with self-assertion and love with selflessness,”<sup>9</sup> or self-sacrifice.

While Goldstein emphatically denies “any hard-and fast distinctions between men and women as such,”<sup>10</sup> and thus eschews gender roles and stereotypes rooted in a basic biological difference, she does acknowledge some common dispositional differences, which play out differently depending on social context and conditioning.<sup>11</sup> On account of these dispositional differences, women cannot ordinarily be said to sin in terms of “pride, will-to-power, exploitation, self-assertiveness, and the treatment of others as objects rather than persons.”<sup>12</sup> In that sense, the standard “conception of redemption as restoring to man what he fundamentally lacks, namely, sacrificial love, the I-Thou relationship,”<sup>13</sup> seemingly does not apply to most women, either.

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<sup>6</sup> Daphne Hampson goes so far as to argue that Christianity should be rejected because of its potential for exclusiveness, in *After Christianity* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1996).

<sup>7</sup> See works by Gustavo Gutierrez, Rosemary Radford Ruether, Elizabeth Johnson, Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, and others.

<sup>8</sup> Valerie Saiving-Goldstein in her influential article, ‘The Human Situation: A Feminine View’, *The Journal of Religion* 40.2 (Apr. 1960), pp. 100-112.

<sup>9</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 101.

<sup>11</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 106.

<sup>12</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 107.

<sup>13</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 107.

Because of the way women are connected to child-bearing and thus a whole network of personal relationships, rather, Goldstein argues that their sins are better described in terms of “triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s own self-definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mistrust of reason—in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.”<sup>14</sup> In point of fact, Goldstein contends, the situation of women as regards sin is the opposite to that of men. For this reason, it must be overcome by diametrically opposing means, indeed, through a self-assertive attitude that traditional theology, defined in terms of masculine experience, continues to speak of “as sin or temptation to sin.”<sup>15</sup>

Following Goldstein, who argued that Reinhold Niebuhr gives the ‘most uncompromising expression’<sup>16</sup> to the one-sided, masculine view of sin just outlined, Judith Plaskow sustains a book-length critique not only of Niebuhr but also of Paul Tillich. On her reading, Niebuhr is a classic example of one who equates sin with pride, that is, a self-aggrandizing positioning of the self over and against others, which can only be corrected by self-denial and self-sacrifice.<sup>17</sup> As Plaskow also acknowledges, Niebuhr allows for a second possibility of sinning through sensuality, or a tendency to get too caught up in temporal things. While the notion of sin as sensuality might have enabled Niebuhr to account for the feminine experience of sin, Plaskow points out with regret that he does not develop it along these lines.<sup>18</sup> Rather, he treats sensuality only insofar as it is an outworking of the prideful desire to dominate others, or idolatrously to objectify them, and thus defines it in terms of the misuse of sexuality.<sup>19</sup>

Since the female body is apparently regarded in this instance as the impetus to sin through sensuality, one might observe that women seem here to be conflated with the inappropriate sexual urges that require to be conquered and scorned in Niebuhr’s account. As Rosemary Radford Ruether has become known for arguing, women are equated in such accounts with unruly ‘nature’, which must be subjected to the control and used for the benefit

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<sup>14</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 109.

<sup>15</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 110.

<sup>16</sup> Goldstein, ‘The Human Situation’, 100.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Boston, Mass.: University Press of America, 1980), pp. 54-62.

<sup>18</sup> Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 63.

<sup>19</sup> Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, 61.

of a dominating mind or spirit.<sup>20</sup> While women seem to be objectified explicitly in this instance, Plaskow concludes that Niebuhr's conception of sin as pride opens women up to objectification implicitly, insofar as it fails to capture the feminine experience of sin, as she describes it very much in keeping with Goldstein's outlook.<sup>21</sup> The same goes for Tillich's conception of sin as estrangement from the self or others, not least because Tillich defines estrangement in terms of hubris and other 'male' qualities.<sup>22</sup>

In her own turn, Daphne Hampson picks up on the work of Goldstein and especially Plaskow in her chapter on 'anthropology' in *Theology and Feminism*.<sup>23</sup> Following these women, she challenges Niebuhr's idea that sin manifests in a prideful attempt to take the place of God in one's own life, and subject others to one's own will, noting like the others that the problem for women is not to learn to be a self *in relation to* others but to be a *self* in relation.<sup>24</sup> Although Niebuhr has been particularly hard-hit by feminists like the aforementioned, their general critique, which is echoed in different ways in the wider body of 'liberation' literature, has been shown to apply to many other modern theologians including Karl Barth, Wolfhart Pannenberg, and Hans Urs von Balthasar, insofar as their accounts fail at very least to capture the experience of sin that is proper to those who simply do not enjoy the prerogative to assert a 'will to power'.<sup>25</sup>

As countless liberation thinkers have noted, such exclusiveness towards 'minorities' is not merely neutral in its impact. For by neglecting pro-actively to provide the resources the marginalized need to identify the sins from which they require to be liberated, mainstream

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<sup>20</sup> See chapter 3 of Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London: SCM, 1983).

<sup>21</sup> Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, pp. 9-50 (women's experience); pp. 62-73 (Niebuhr).

<sup>22</sup> Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace*, pp. 95-148 (Tillich).

<sup>23</sup> Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, pp. 116-47 (Anthropology).

<sup>24</sup> Hampson, *Theology and Feminism*, pp. 118.

<sup>25</sup> Judith Vaughn, *Sociality, Ethics and Social Change: A Critical Appraisal of Reinhold Niebuhr's Ethics in the Light of Rosemary Radford Ruether's Works* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1983). Not unlike Niebuhr, Wolfhart Pannenberg defines sin in terms of egotistical pride in his *Anthropology in Theological Perspectives*. Whereas many such accounts purport to apply to all persons, there are others, such as that of Karl Barth, who was famously content to describe the role of women in 'complementarian' as opposed to egalitarian terms, which some might say denies their full humanity and conflates their 'virtue' with submissiveness, responsiveness, or passivity, where feminists would see such attitudes as potential areas of feminine sin. See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, ch. 10, ed. G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1960). See also Rachel Muers' critique of Barth (and von Balthasar) in 'The Mute Cannot Keep Silent', in Diana Lipton and Janet Martin Soskice (eds), *Feminism and Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). See also Ruether's critique of Barth and the Calvinist tradition in *Sexism and God-Talk*, 83-4.

theologies passively thwart their efforts to image God and exercise their humanity. Implicitly, therefore, these theologies dehumanize minorities in ways that not only preclude their potential competition in desirable areas of human work and inquiry, but also legitimize their objectification, oppression, and the enlistment of their services for personal ends. As such, the neglect of mainstream theologies to develop resources relevant to the project of liberation seemingly bespeaks a fundamental, if unarticulated, or unconscious, but nonetheless culpable desire to further a situation in which it is possible to suppress the subjectivity or agency of others without being called into account, or even recognized, as doing so.

While it is clear that those excluded cannot realize their own humanity and image God in the way he designed under these circumstances, it could be argued that the *imago dei* is also undermined in this instance in those who passively disempower the oppressed, even if less obviously so. As I already noted, there is something deeply antithetical about efforts to image a God who empowers all persons to exercise their humanity to his glory, which turn on withholding the opportunities others would need to do the same. This raises a question towards which I already gestured as to whether it is possible for *anyone* to image God, let alone to articulate a sound theological anthropology, apart from an account in which all are fully equipped to do so.

Although a growing number of works which call for this theological ‘de-segregation’, and corresponding ‘subjectification’ of women and other excluded parties, there has been very little evidence to this point of responsiveness to the call on the part of the male-stream theologies themselves. In effect, consequently, theological anthropology has remained hermetically sealed off to the vast majority of human beings, such that their outcries have continued to go theologically unheard. Ironically, therefore, the field of inquiry in question might be regarded as both un-theological and un-anthropological—a defeater of its own purposes and a contradiction to itself.

While this conclusion may have obtained with reference to many of the theological anthropologies that have been developed in the past, it remains to consider whether very recent work in the field has moved the discussion forward in the relevant respects. In this connection, I turn now to consider David Kelsey’s two-volume work entitled, *Eccentric Existence*, a monumental scholarly achievement with which no current intervention in the field of theological anthropology can neglect to interact.<sup>26</sup> Although Kelsey’s work covers a diverse range of issues that are relevant to the study of theological anthropology, including

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<sup>26</sup> David Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, 2 vols. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2009).



ideas about human nature, the relationship between human beings and God, and the doctrine of the Incarnation of the Son of God, his treatment of sin is most pertinent in the present context for obvious reasons and will be the focus of the discussion below.

In developing a hamartiology that is consistent with his broader perspectives, Kelsey stresses the impossibility of providing a systematic account or ‘list’ of individual sins, which would obscure the utterly diverse and individual ways in which sin is committed. Instead, Kelsey offers a detailed and tremendously insightful typology of sins, which he calls ‘existential hows’.<sup>27</sup> Initially, Kelsey defines sin as “a distortion of faith’s loyalty to God’s creative project.”<sup>28</sup> For Kelsey, this distortion always expresses itself in a distortion of persons, or what Kelsey calls ‘personal bodies’, orientation “to their proximate contexts that are largely made up of networks of interactions among fellow creatures.”<sup>29</sup>

Although he draws a distinction between sin—before God—and evil—towards other creatures—nevertheless he recognizes that sin tends to manifest itself through evil.<sup>30</sup> In addition to the types of sin that spring from distorted faith, Kelsey speaks of sins that represent a distortion of trust in God and thus a “distortion of personal bodies’ orientation to their ultimate context.”<sup>31</sup> Finally, there are sins that represent “distortions of human creatures’ responses in love to the triune God relating to them in incarnate *agape* to reconcile them structurally,”<sup>32</sup> not only with God but also with other personal bodies.<sup>33</sup> In sum, there are sinful distortions of faith, hope, and love, which pertain to God’s creative, consummative, and conciliatory work, respectively.

While the range of types of sin that Kelsey associates with these three broader categories of sin is vast, there are recurring themes, some of which are highly germane to the present discussion. These are the themes on which I will focus in what follows. One such theme is covered in Kelsey’s treatment of ways in which faith can be corrupted, namely, through distorted practices of wonder. In distorted wonder, he writes, “perception is separated from faithful respect for fellow creatures’ concrete particularity...Such perception invites exploitation of what is perceived.”<sup>34</sup> As a result “fellow creatures are perceived as instances

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<sup>27</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, pp. 419-21.

<sup>28</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 412.

<sup>29</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 412.

<sup>30</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 405.

<sup>31</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 412.

<sup>32</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 865.

<sup>33</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 847.

<sup>34</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 415.

of stereotypes,”<sup>35</sup> whether sexist, racist, or classist, that are not true to the reality of those creatures and that are harmful to them.

In making this point already, Kelsey by contrast to some of his modern theological predecessors, proves himself fully attuned to the liberation critiques which by this point in time can no longer be easily ignored. The evident concern on his part to facilitate liberation comes into fuller relief in his subsequent treatment of the way personal bodies may live ‘at cross-grain’ to their actual, God-given identities, by trusting in things other than God as the ground of their reality and value.<sup>36</sup> Though Kelsey lists numerous ways of doing this, the most relevant here involves trusting in what he calls the ‘quotidian’, or daily circumstances, rather than God, to ground personal value. This can lead to trusting in stereotypes as the ground of one’s value, which not only results in individuals being “passively defined as minimally agentic, scarcely at all the agents of their own lives,”<sup>37</sup> but also to their being treated as “disposable instrumental means”<sup>38</sup> to the end of securing another’s reality and value.<sup>39</sup>

In a subsequent chapter, Kelsey argues in this connection that “it is morally imperative to resist and correct unjust diminution of human well-being. Enactment of such practices is inherent in faithful response to God’s relating to humankind creatively.”<sup>40</sup> That said, he distinguishes human flourishing, which is defined “by virtue of God’s absolute self-commitment to relate to them creatively and to draw them into eschatological consummation,”<sup>41</sup> from human well-being, which “is measured in degrees along several different but complexly inter-related axes (physical, psychological, social, cultural, etc.).”<sup>42</sup> In this and subsequent chapters, he draws attention to the problems that arise from conflating the two categories of well-being and flourishing, or pursuing one in isolation, even while acknowledging that because of the way God has related to humanity through the incarnation,

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<sup>35</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 415.

<sup>36</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, pp. 422-3.

<sup>37</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 425.

<sup>38</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 428.

<sup>39</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 437: “For those whose agency of their own lives is systemically undermined in personal identities distorted by acquiescence in others’ stereotypes of them, and who nevertheless trust their acceptance of those stereotypes to ground the reality and value of their lives, death ceases to be a universal feature of living and becomes the dominant good, the liberator to be longed for. To live with no possibility of being the agent of one’s own life is to live not just a dying life but the living death of the radically oppressed.”

<sup>40</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 570 (chapter 16).

<sup>41</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 570.

<sup>42</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 570.

“human creatures’ proximate and ultimate contexts coincide.”<sup>43</sup>

In a discussion of distorted love, for instance, Kelsey notes that when we try to love our neighbors in the absence of prayer, which he defines in quite general terms as an orientation towards God, and so try to put things right in our proximate contexts without reference to their ultimate context, we can “deepen the distortion of the lives of fellow estranged human creatures.”<sup>44</sup> Although “such practices of love as neighbor may be impressively moral and even self-sacrificing in their self-forgetful, undistractedly intensive focus on the suffering and oppression undergone by particular fellow human creatures,”<sup>45</sup> he writes, they are dangerous to their beneficiaries nonetheless, because they lack “reference to an ultimate context that relativizes them and lays the actions of the finite human creatures under judgment from a perspective other than the one provided by their proximate contexts themselves’, which may be based on prejudices, biases, cultural values, common wisdom [self-delusions, competitiveness, and ignorance<sup>46</sup>] that need to be criticized or called into question.”<sup>47</sup>

That is to say, practices of neighbor-love without prayer “lack adequate basis for critical distance on other human creatures’ own answers to the question ‘what actions will in fact, in particular circumstances, make for our well being as the particular human creatures we are in our particular proximate contexts’.”<sup>48</sup> Since the approach to helping the poor, victimized, and oppressed in question “assumes superior wisdom of others’ judgments about this question,”<sup>49</sup> Kelsey concludes, it denies them the right to answer that question themselves. By treating the needy as voiceless objects of patronizing charity, consequently, this approach leaves room for benefactors, no matter how seemingly self-sacrificing, to give the needy only what they *want* to give, which may not be what the needy *need* to receive, and which may in fact lock them in to their state of marginalization and oppression.

In his final chapter on sin as distorted love, Kelsey contests the ideas of personal identity that are evidently at the root of all forms of oppression, even those that appear under

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<sup>43</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 854 (see chapters 16, 17, 24).

<sup>44</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 853.

<sup>45</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 853.

<sup>46</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 856.

<sup>47</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 855. Kelsey undertakes a parallel discussion in chapter 16’s treatment of distorted hopeful practices that are based on the not yet and now of eschatological blessing; and in chapter 17’s account of acknowledging election without judgment and final judgment without election.

<sup>48</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 858.

<sup>49</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 858.

the guise of aid or assistance.<sup>50</sup> Without reference to God, he writes, “a personal identity is shown to be worth living by its display and exercise of power to command or coerce respect from others,”<sup>51</sup> indeed, to bully respect through terrifying others by political, economic, cultural, intellectual, or any other means.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, “what grounds the respect worthiness of one’s life may [also] be seen as the power to be superior to fellow human creatures in one’s capacities to exercise one’s powers of conformity to the moral social order.”<sup>53</sup>

Although an individual may have vast imperfections and do considerable violence to others, explicitly or implicitly, such a sense of moral superiority makes it possible to maintain a feeling of power and dominion over others, that has the same effect as bullying and coercion in terms of rendering others indebted or inferior to oneself, in “inherently competitive zero-sum games that are driven by constant competitive comparison with other human creatures.”<sup>54</sup> Such power games, in which some must fail for others to succeed, are sustained on Kelsey’s conclusion by persons whose failure to ground their sense of identity and value in God has led them to think of themselves as the arbiters of power in the world, whether this power is attained through coercion or moral superiority.

Of course, Kelsey insists on leaving open the question whether Niebuhr was right to say that pride is at the root of such distortions of personal identity.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, something very much like pride seems to emerge in his discussion as the basis for the sorts of sin described above and others. Thus, Kelsey calls for the relinquishment of such distorted personal identities and urges his readers to draw on the resources provided by practices of prayer to hear the voices of the oppressed. Correspondingly, we have seen, his work engages in a sustained way with the pressing liberation-related concerns of our times, and shows a sensitivity to those concerns that is to my knowledge unparalleled in prior theological anthropologies.

In this and many other respects, there is nothing but cause to celebrate Kelsey’s accomplishment. Even so, the question could be posed as to how Kelsey might have taken his trajectory a step further and actually incorporated into one of his six chapters on sin an effort to practice what he preaches and equip those that require liberation to “understand their situation...discover the causes of their oppression, organize themselves into movements, and

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<sup>50</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, chapter 25.

<sup>51</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 858.

<sup>52</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 868.

<sup>53</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 870.

<sup>54</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 874.

<sup>55</sup> Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, p. 420.

act in a coordinated fashion.”<sup>56</sup> Although Kelsey has certainly championed the cause of liberation and proves himself acutely aware of the risks involved in working for this cause without reference to the input of those that need to be liberated, the reader could be left wondering whether he has not ultimately fallen into the same trap as his modern theological predecessors, namely, to describe sin and what it means to overcome sin primarily from the perspective of a perpetrator of exclusion and oppression.

In this connection, another reviewer has noted, there is not much in Kelsey’s account by way of a focused treatment of gender, sexuality, and race-related issues, which it would have been a considerable service to theology and the church today to provide.<sup>57</sup> This is not so much a critique as a question as to how the next generation of theologians might draw on Kelsey’s work to set systematic theology on the right course to its logical conclusion. This of course is just one fruitful area of inquiry that Kelsey’s landmark work has opened up for contemporary theology, and it is the area I wish to consider further in the attempt that follows to develop a doctrine of sin from the perspective not only of the perpetrators of exclusion, but also of those who experience exclusion. As a preliminary to this discussion, however, I will sketch the classical doctrine of the image of God, which, when rightly construed, anticipates a diverse account of what it means to overcome sin in order to reflect the image.

### **The Classical Doctrine of the Image of God**

The first reference to the doctrine of the image of God in Aquinas’ magisterial *Summa Theologiae* occurs not in the context of any discussion of human persons but rather in the context of Aquinas’ treatment of the doctrine of the Trinity. Aquinas speaks of the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, as something like the Father’s thought of himself and thus as his (self) Image.<sup>58</sup> On his account, therefore, the Son proceeds from the Father by way of knowledge or intellect, because his relationship to the Father is like that of one known by a knower, where the one known is the knower himself, such that the known is also a knower in turn.<sup>59</sup>

In order to explain the possibility of the reflexive knowledge of the Father and Son—or the self-knowledge of God—Aquinas further appeals to the Holy Spirit, who is said to

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<sup>56</sup> Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Orbis, 1996).

<sup>57</sup> Tom Greggs, ‘Review of *Eccentric Existence*’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 65:4 (Nov. 2012), pp. 449-63, see p. 462.

<sup>58</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (ST) Ia.35: on the Son as Image.

<sup>59</sup> ST Ia.27.2: on the generation of the Son.

proceed from the Father and Son not by way of intellect but by way of the will or love or desire for that which is known, to wit, the Son by the Father, and the Father by the Son.<sup>60</sup> It is this love, or God's Spirit, that enacts the possibility of the divine self-knowledge—that is, the Son's imaging of the Father.

As the discussion above suggests, the doctrine of the Trinity explains the capacity of God not simply to *be* God, but also to know and communicate himself as God, to want to be and to act like God. In that sense, the doctrine confirms the sense in which God is worthy of the name 'God', that is, a being who always completely is what he is, which involves being and knowing and saying and willing and doing all that is good or consistent with love.

Of course, it is impossible for human beings to know God as Triune apart from the Incarnation of God's Son, who revealed the Trinity by continuing to play his role in the divine life in the context of leading a human life, that is, by expressing his Spirit or desire to glorify and fulfil the purposes of the Father, which stems from his knowledge of the Father as the supreme good. In bringing this knowledge and desire to bear in his ordinary human experiences, the Son was prevented from ascribing too much significance to the objects of those experiences, and to de-valuing others accordingly. That is to say, he was kept from sin and the skewed perspective on reality and problematic actions or vices it produces.

Through his sinless human life, he not only revealed the Triune nature of God in a way to which human beings could relate; he also communicated that all human beings are made in the image of the Trinity, that is, in his image, to do as he did as a human, namely, to express their spirits (lives, minds, personalities) given through the creative work of the Son himself in the light of the knowledge that the Father is the highest good. To this end, the classical doctrine of the *imago dei* suggests, human beings are equipped with intellect and will, or abilities and desires to know and to act, in the context of embodied, ordinary life.

Although human beings as creatures of the divine are not unconstrained like God in terms of their abilities and interests to know and do what is good, and though their capacities in these respects, unlike his, must be cultivated over time, it is precisely by striving to the best of their abilities to realize their potential at any given time that human beings image God in the limited ways they can and improve in the ability to do so. That is to say, they image God by seeking to realize their potential as much as possible at any point in time.

Since imaging God entails imitating Christ, whose reflection of God's image empowered all human beings to do the same, there is a strong sense in which personal efforts

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<sup>60</sup> *ST* Ia.36.

to image God through the realization of God-given potential cannot be divorced or attempted apart from efforts to support others in their efforts to do the same. That is to say, there is no imaging of God which turns on disempowering others for this very purpose. By the same token, there is no ‘derivative’ imaging, that is, imaging of God which trades on abnegating personal potential—and even the self—in order to help another realize theirs.

In sum, true imaging of God involves non-competitive relationships in which the imaging of one does not undermine that of the other. Although this is an admittedly difficult balance to achieve, it can be struck at least at the theoretical level by exposing the systemically sinful structures that obscure the reality that each one stands alone before God and must image and be enabled to image him in this way, albeit not without reference to human relationships.<sup>61</sup> In what follows, therefore, I will attempt to explore what seems like the means of achieving equality in this regard, namely, a suitably differentiated account of sin, which recognizes the perspective—and hurdles to imaging God—not only of the included minority but also of the excluded majority.

### **A Differentiated Account of Sin**

As I aim to demonstrate further below, useful resources for developing this account, at least at the preliminary level, were already latent in the Aristotelian idea, appropriated by Thomas Aquinas, that virtue consists in a mean between two extreme forms of vice, namely, one of excess and one of deficiency.<sup>62</sup> To these resources, Aquinas added another, drawn from a longstanding Christian tradition of referring to seven capital vices. Far from exhausting all possible instances of vice, this list was simply taken as an indicator of the ‘head’ (*caput*) or ‘heads’ from which innumerable other vices might follow. In what follows, I will employ these resources in a combined form in order to develop a constructive, two-fold typology of sin, which provides a possible basis or model for incorporating liberation critiques into mainstream theological anthropology.

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<sup>61</sup> Kathryn Tanner gives an excellent account of how to achieve this balance in *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992); also relevant in this context is her article, ‘The Difference Theological Anthropology Makes’, *Theology Today* 50.4 (Jan. 1994), pp. 567-597 and her *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001). As Joy Ann McDougall argues in, ‘Sin—No More? A Feminist Re-Envisioning of a Christian Theology of Sin’ (228), Tanner’s discussion in this context provides implicit resources for developing a feminist account of sin.

<sup>62</sup> See Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics* II.8.

Although sin may be defined as the loss of orientation towards God, it bears noting at the outset of this discussion that vices—what Kelsey called ‘evils’—or failures in ordinary human life are only formally, and not substantially, distinct from sins. As such, they are the means by which sins before God are ordinarily committed, namely, by over or under-estimating the significance of temporal circumstances and goods, including the self, as a result of forgetting God as the highest good. Thus, the seven capital vices, which represent seven categories of skewed perspective on reality and of correspondingly corrupt actions, have frequently been described in terms of the seven ‘cardinal sins’ of pride, greed, envy, apathy, wrath, lust, and gluttony.

At least since Augustine, not to mention Scripture, pride has often been described as the root of all sin, a view which has been contested, as we have seen, by the likes of Goldstein, Plaskow, and Hampson, on the grounds that it continues the longstanding and admittedly problematic tendency to define sin in one-sided terms, that is, from the point of view of self-promoting perpetrators of exclusion.<sup>63</sup> This, however, is only the case if the sense is overlooked in which pride before God may manifest not only in an extreme of excess, namely, hubris, but also in an extreme of deficiency, that is, in false humility.<sup>64</sup>

Whereas pride in its hubristic form is characterized by the familiar features of an inflated self-image or self-love that is accompanied by an exaggerated sense of personal entitlement, false humility by sharp contrast proceeds from a deficient self-love or sense of personal identity and integrity. While hubris tries to transcend normal human limitations, in other words, false humility renders the self worthless on account of them. It opens individuals up to exploitation, that is, to be treated as objects or means to achieving the ambitions of the hubristic, as opposed to subjects with agency and intentions of their own.

In this connection, it is worth noting that false humility, to say nothing of hubris, is not necessarily a matter of personal disposition. It may be imposed upon individuals or classes, normally on account of some feature such as sex, race or class, which is assumed to justify their manipulation or exploitation—that is, their exclusion from the normal scope of human prerogatives and human life. Although false humility, for one, is often an ingrained disposition as well, it may be so in some cases precisely because cultural conventions nurture and even require it in, say, women and the poor.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See for example Proverbs 11:2, 6:16-17.

<sup>64</sup> See Augustine’s *Confessions*, especially book II. See also Aquinas, *ST* 2.2.162.

<sup>65</sup> See for example, Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), chapter 2 on ‘Women’s Nature?’.



Whether it is cultivated by nature or nurture or some combination of the two, in any event, false humility as a disposition can no longer legitimately be taken as a basis for determining the social roles that particular individuals should fulfil. The tendency to do this can be overcome if the conventions whereby dispositions—or projected dispositions—that are unjustly connected with gender or class stereotypes, for example, are challenged by both men and women, rich and poor. Too often, however, such stereotypes are not contested, whether at the level of individual dispositions or the cultural conventions that foster systemic oppression, because the submissiveness of one party to another serves both parties on some level. While it benefits those who are served most obviously, it also allows the subservient to relinquish the often burdensome human responsibility to take ownership of personal agency and make the most of personal abilities, albeit by accepting subservience or exploitation in exchange. Indeed, it enables the subservient to derive a sense of identity and security simply from facilitating the lives of others, who navigate the world’s challenges on their behalf.

The way in which the tendencies of the two parties play out can be traced through a further discussion of the other vices that follow from pride<sup>66</sup>—though not necessarily in any order, or in any particular combination, beyond pride and greed.<sup>67</sup> For Aquinas, in fact, greed is the way in which a prideful predisposition manifests itself in practice.<sup>68</sup> As I already hinted, the hubristic are characterized by a greed for their own promotion and primacy and are therefore prone to treat other persons and objects *as* objects to be used for their own ends and devices. Such objectification, even if it is the product of an unconscious bias, can occur in a wide range of ways, not merely physical, as in the case of lust and gluttony, but also at more personal or intellectual levels, on which the falsely humble may find themselves barred from lifestyles and areas or approaches to inquiry that press the boundaries of the social roles that have been set for them by the hubristic, or that test the limits of standard hubristic approaches in general.

By contrast to the hubristic, the falsely humble generally exhibit a proclivity to seek their own obliteration or incorporation into the plans of others, however vicious, and however much this may involve forfeiting the basic human right, and responsibility, to cultivate personal capabilities.<sup>69</sup> On some level, theirs is a greed for pain and self-destruction, whether it is a matter of personal desire or systemic enforcement. Often, I have noted, it involves

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<sup>66</sup> ST 2.1.77.4.

<sup>67</sup> ST 2.1.73.1.

<sup>68</sup> ST 2.1.84.1-2.

<sup>69</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011).

some of both, given how local cultures and social conventions form personal dispositions in the way described above.

The five further vices are the means through which individuals direct themselves towards different and mutually exclusive ends, in accordance with the objects of their greed. These ends bring them into conflict with one another, where virtue unites persons with diverse objectives under the overarching purpose of operating in light of the knowledge that God rather than any human consideration is the highest good. In Aquinas' account, the order in which the subsequent vices are enumerated traces a progression from more spiritual to physical vices.<sup>70</sup>

The spiritual vices of pride, greed, envy, and apathy are described as 'cold-hearted' or reputable, because they are indirect and thus covert and are therefore relatively easy to conceal. In the case of such vices, individuals do not strictly speaking perform vicious deeds. Instead, they fail to do the things they ought to do, or take up tasks other than those that are most important or deserving of attention, in ways that cause considerable damage or loss of opportunity for others. By contrast to the cold-hearted vices, the physical or warm-hearted vices of wrath, lust and gluttony are direct and overt.<sup>71</sup>

The first and most serious of the reputable vices is envy.<sup>72</sup> While this vice sometimes causes persons to covet the belongings of others, it can also entail a rather more sinister desire simply to eradicate evidence that others possess property, achievements, capabilities, or even personal qualities that differ from one's own; or to ensure that persons who differ from oneself in some respect—perhaps to do with race or sex—do not have access to the same resources and opportunities as are readily available to persons of one's own kind. In other words, envy may turn on a desire to eliminate difference.

When it comes to hubristic envy, the desire to do away with difference tends to express itself in withholding due recognition, credit, support, or protection from those envied.<sup>73</sup> By the same token, it often involves demonstrations of favoritism towards, or an exclusive focus on, those similar to oneself, even if they are not the most deserving or needy of assistance.<sup>74</sup> Though the envious may make no direct attempts to marginalize and oppress others by these means, they nevertheless render it virtually impossible for those they envy to succeed and thrive in the areas where they are excluded. On some level, moreover, they

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<sup>70</sup> *ST* 2.1.72.2.

<sup>71</sup> *ST* 2.2.142.2.

<sup>72</sup> *ST* 2.2.36.1.

<sup>73</sup> *ST* 2.1.71.5.

<sup>74</sup> *ST* 2.2.63.

objectify the excluded by forcing on them a situation where there is no alternative but to serve the agenda of the envious, whether intellectual or practical, or else be forced to suffer the consequences of total exclusion by the arbiters of social power.

By contrast, the falsely humble seek in envy to eliminate the differences they themselves exhibit, so as to benefit from the solidarity and protection of the socio-economically or intellectually powerful. Their form of envy may express itself through servility, or efforts self-deprecatingly to affirm the primacy of the powerful with a view to gaining a place, however lowly, within their regime. In the case of both extremes, however, the vice committed is cold-hearted, precisely because envy is disguised in the form of assisting or praising other persons.

Although it would fall outside the scope of this paper to elaborate how, it stands to reason that envy is one of the main impetuses behind the prolongation of extreme poverty, which is protested by liberation theologians; the marginalization of persons with disabilities, cognitive or physical; the ongoing relegation of women to jobs that in some way involve helping men do their jobs—and the traumatic, constant battle women face if they aspire let alone manage to succeed in accomplishing anything more than this; and above all, the lack of consideration for liberation concerns on the part of mainstream theologies.

Whereas hubris generates excess and false humility deficiency in the case of envy, the situation is exceptionally reversed when it comes to the next vice of apathy. The excessive form of this vice, which arises from false humility, entails rash or reckless behavior, while the deficient form, proper to hubris, consists in lethargy, laziness, or lack of ambition.<sup>75</sup> These forms of passivity arguably spring from hubris' inflated sense of self and corresponding unwillingness to confront normal human limitations.

Ineluctably, such reluctance manifests in refusals to take risks or countenance unknown or potentially challenging situations in which those limitations might be revealed. Thus, the excessive form of the vice in question gives rise to cowardice, a form of indirect action in which individuals fail to fulfill their responsibilities or come to the aid of others out of a fear of being exposed as ignorant or incapable in some respect. Alternatively, they may exhibit lethargy on the assumption that they are 'above' assuming various and especially trivial responsibilities, which are thereby imposed on the aforementioned majority, including women, racial minorities, and the poor, whose time is unjustly regarded as less important.

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<sup>75</sup> *ST* 2.2.125-7.

Because the falsely humble generally lack or are denied a sense of personal identity and purpose, or the self-confidence to cultivate one, they are prone to take up these responsibilities. They are reckless or rash precisely because they frequently or habitually abandon their own projects, even that of personal development, albeit oftentimes by tacit or overt force, in order to organize their lives and plans around the demands of others, whether those demands are explicit or implicit. Since the rash are unwilling or unable to establish principles by which to prioritize their activities, decline requests or respond to needs—whether real or perceived—they tend to engage in a host of trivial, insignificant, and diffuse activities that not only prevent them from employing their own abilities but even from realizing what those are.

While the cold-hearted vices largely turn on indirect action, I have noted that the warm-hearted vices of wrath, lust and gluttony involve direct action, which is why they are more easily recognizable and thus less ‘reputable’.<sup>76</sup> In its hubristic form, wrath lashes out in a long list of ways, which on Aquinas’ account includes robbery; cheating, murder, injury, derision, defamation of character, discord or contrariety of wills, contention or contrariety of speech, strife or contrariety of actions, schism, and so on.<sup>77</sup>

In the case of false humility, wrath turns on a deficiency in due anger, or an over-willingness to reconcile with or remain subjected to the harmful influence of oppressors.<sup>78</sup> Both wrath and such over-compliance or over-submissiveness flow from an urge towards self-protection, which motivates hostile attempts at self-defense in the case of hubris, and renders the falsely humble reluctant to defend themselves in threatening or degrading situations, out of fear of the penalties they may incur for resisting their own mistreatment and exploitation.

The excessive form of the next vice of lust is shamelessness with regard to sexual fixations, perversion, or the sexual exploitation of others; it is the ‘sensuality’ to which Niebuhr referred. The deficient form of this vice, which he neglected to mention, involves shamefulness or unwarranted disgust at or disregard for personal sexuality, which may allow for its exploitation.<sup>79</sup> Though lust is a vice that is typically associated with human sexuality, I would argue that it can also be more generally defined in terms of an overpowering desire for or reluctance to embrace any particular good, including fame, power, wealth, and even some

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<sup>76</sup> ST 2.2.158.6.

<sup>77</sup> ST 2.2.37-39, 41, 64-8, 72-8.

<sup>78</sup> ST 2.2.158; see also Aristotle’s *Eudemian Ethics* II.4, 122b1-4.

<sup>79</sup> ST 2.2.153-4.

immaterial goods such as knowledge, causes, and so on. In short, any good that becomes an object of obsession, even by way of unhealthy or self-destructive aversion, can be said to be an object of lust.

A similar principle applies to the last vice of gluttony, which concerns the goods of the body by contrast to those of the external world. Though gluttony is ordinarily supposed to manifest in any inordinate—self-indulgent or self-depriving, excessive or deficient—desire for food or drink, it might also be said to express itself in the pursuit or avoidance of any substance or activity that is relevant to the physical needs—life, health, hygiene—of the body.<sup>80</sup> Though the excessive form of this vice is quite common, particularly in the West, there are many contexts in which women and other marginalized parties experience the deficient form of this vice. They are literally mal-nourished, even to the point of starvation, so that others locally and globally can enjoy nourishment and good health.

### **An ‘All-Inclusive’ Theology**

Although the taxonomy of sin outlined above has not added all that much that is new to the existing body of work on the ‘other’ experience of sin, it has provided a framework in which existing critical and constructive work stemming largely from the experience of ‘minorities’ can be situated, and through which it can perhaps be elaborated and systematised in greater detail in the future. This framework is of additional significance in that it naturally incorporates the perspective of both of the parties in question and thus provides a basic model for integrating the concerns of liberation thinkers into mainstream systematic theology, particularly in the field of theological anthropology.

While a scholar like David Kelsey has already taken considerable strides in this regard, we have seen that there is more work to be done when it comes to extrapolating the logical conclusions of his project. In the case of theological anthropology, this is precisely the work of replacing a tendency to treat sin in a rather one-sided manner with a two-fold typology of sin, which gives a voice not merely to those who have the power to liberate but also to those that require to be liberated. As I have already noted in my treatment of some feminist critiques of the traditional doctrine of sin as ‘pride’, a biased or one-sided account of sin tends to feed into the sin tendencies of those who experience sin as false humility. That in

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<sup>80</sup> *ST* 2.2.148, 150.

turn places the hubristic in the optimal position to take advantage of their counterparts and so to sin in their own way.

Although it is more obviously and destructively the case that the falsely humble are prevented from overcoming sin and imaging God under these circumstances, the image is likewise undermined in those that objectify the falsely humble, even if less obviously or destructively so. As this suggests, it is difficult if not impossible for both parties to image God, let alone to articulate a sound theological anthropology, while equal attention is not given to the obstacles to imitating Christ that present themselves to both the hubristic and the falsely humble. Since the latter require different tools for this purpose, one could go so far as to say that Christian teaching that neglects to offer those tools passively precludes their status as images of God, thereby giving license to objectify and maintain in suppression those that most need and deserve ‘subjectification’.

For this reason, liberation theologies have made “an appeal to all theologians, of the First, Second, and Third world, calling them to work out the social-liberative dimension of faith.” This “is a once-and-for-all-appeal: once theology as a whole has assimilated this call and made it its own, then the name ‘liberation theology’ can be dropped, because by then all theologies will be liberation theologies in their own way—otherwise they will not be Christian theologies.”<sup>81</sup> While I would not necessarily wish to endorse all theologies of liberation or feminism and the extremes to which some of them have resorted, I would echo the sentiment that theologies that remain unconcerned with liberation go so far in many respects as to thwart the whole purpose of theology—and the gospel.

As one well-known liberation theologian has written, “the gospel is not aimed chiefly at ‘modern’ men and women in their critical spirit but first and foremost at ‘non-persons’ whose basic dignity and rights are denied them.”<sup>82</sup> That is to say, its purpose is to unleash the God-given potential of those in whom that potential is most suppressed—a purpose which is defeated through theologies that compound the suppression of the suppressed by failing to equip them with the same level of resource available to, if not employed by, the hubristic for overcoming sin, imaging God, and finally, thereby, being human. This, in fact, is the ultimate telos not only of theological anthropology, but also of systematic theology overall. The task is to continue the work of Christ who came to rehabilitate his image in *all* persons, by articulating an all-inclusive theology that is consistent with the life-giving Spirit of his work.

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<sup>81</sup> Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 92.

<sup>82</sup> Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology*, p. 8.